

V. PUBLIC RECREATION NEEDS

INTRODUCTION

In preparing this plan, The Division of Parks and Recreation (DPR) conducted public meetings at locations across North Carolina. These meetings are supplemented by a statewide random survey, a state park visitor survey and a survey completed by state park advisory committee members. Consistent messages from these sources of public input include:

- Recreation activities available at state parks are among the most popular in North Carolina: viewing scenery, beach activities, picnicking, swimming and visiting natural areas. The public would like to have more opportunities to participate in these activities in the future.
- Hiking trails and nature trails are more popular than horse trails, bike trails and off-road vehicle areas.
- North Carolinians think that it's important to protect the state's natural resources and more parks are needed to protect other natural areas.

THE NORTH CAROLINA OUTDOOR RECREATION PARTICIPATION SURVEY

The best indicator of public outdoor recreation needs in North Carolina comes from results of the North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Participation Survey. The survey was mailed to 3,100 randomly selected residents in the spring of 1989. Forty-five percent, or 1,399 people, returned completed surveys. Each person receiving the survey was asked to estimate the number of times the members of his/her household had participated in each of 43 activities. The survey results provide good insight into the participation of North Carolinians in a wide range of outdoor recreation activities. Since the survey was completed, new recreational activities—such as mountain biking and in-line skating—have grown in popularity. Such activities were not included in the 1989 survey but were considered at the 1999 systemwide plan public meetings.

Popularity of Outdoor Recreation Activities

The survey found that the five most popular outdoor recreation activities in North Carolina are walking for pleasure, driving for pleasure, viewing scenery, beach activities, and visiting historical sites. Three out of every four households participated in walking for pleasure at least once in the past 12 months (Table V-1). In addition to the five most popular activities, over 50 percent of the households responding to a 1989 survey participated at least once in the following activities: swimming (in lakes, rivers, or oceans), visiting natural areas, picnicking, attending sports events, visiting zoos, and freshwater fishing.

Table V-1. Outdoor Recreation Activities Ranked by Popularity

Rank	Activity	Percentage of Households Participating
1	Walking for Pleasure	75%
2	Driving for Pleasure	72
3	Viewing Scenery	71
4	Beach Activities	69
5	Visiting Historical Sites	62
6	Swimming (in Lakes, Rivers, and Oceans)	54
7	Visiting Natural Areas	53
8	Picnicking	52
9	Attending Sports Events	52
10	Visiting Zoos	51
11	Fishing—Freshwater	50
12	Use of Open Areas	41
13	Swimming (in Pools)	40
14	Fishing—Saltwater	38
15	Attending Outdoor Cultural Events	35
16	Bicycling for Pleasure	32
17	Other Winter Sports	31
18	Camping, Tent or Vehicle	29
19	Softball and Baseball	28
20	Hunting	28
21	Use of Play Equipment	28
22	Power Boating	26
23	Trail Hiking	26
24	Jogging or Running	24
25	Basketball	24
26	Nature Study	22
27	Golf	22
28	Target Shooting	20
29	Water Skiing	19
30	Camping, Primitive	14
31	Tennis	14
32	Use Motorcycles, Dirt Bikes, ATV's	13
33	Use Four Wheel Drive Vehicles	13
34	Canoeing and Kayaking	13
35	Horseback Riding	12
36	Volleyball	12
37	Downhill Skiing	12
38	Football	11
39	Soccer	7
40	Sailboating	7
41	Skateboarding	6
42	Cross Country Skiing	2
43	Windsurfing	1

FUNDING PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC OUTDOOR RECREATION

The North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Survey asked residents a series of questions in order to identify and rank future demand for public outdoor recreation. Future demand was determined by asking them which activities they would have tried more often had adequate facilities been available. Respondents were then asked to rank these activities in order of importance. A scoring system was used assigning each activity a rating of high, moderate, or low future demand based on the survey results.

In the second part of the analysis, the respondents' level of support for publicly funded outdoor recreation activities was determined by asking them to identify and rank those activities to which government should give highest priority when spending public money. The same scoring system used to analyze unmet demand was then applied to the survey results, with each activity receiving a high, moderate, or low rating in public support for public funding.

In the final part of the needs analysis, the two ratings for each activity were combined to produce a score of from one to nine that reflected both future demand and public funding priorities. The activities that ranked high in both future demand and support for public funding received the highest priority in the needs assessment. Support for public funding was given lower priority than expressed demand (Table V-2).

Table V-2. Priorities for Public Funding of Outdoor Recreation

Activity	Future Demand	Support for Public Funding
Walking for Pleasure	High	High
Camping, Tent or Vehicle	High	High
Picnicking	High	High
Beach Activities	High	High
Fishing—Freshwater	High	High
Attend Outdoor Cultural Events	High	High
Bicycling for Pleasure	High	Moderate
Swimming (in Pools)	High	Moderate
Visiting Natural Areas	Moderate	High
Use of Play Equipment	Moderate	High
Visiting Zoos	Moderate	High
Visiting Historical Sites	Moderate	High
Viewing Scenery	Moderate	Moderate
Hunting	Moderate	Moderate
Trail Hiking	Moderate	Moderate
Use of Open Areas	Moderate	Moderate
Target Shooting	Moderate	Moderate
Swimming (Lakes, Rivers, Ocean)	Moderate	Moderate
Fishing—Saltwater	Moderate	Moderate

Based on this analysis, many of the activities rated as the highest priorities are activities that are currently offered or might be offered at many state park units. The activities include walking for pleasure, tent or vehicle camping, picnicking, beach activities, fishing, visiting natural areas, viewing scenery, trail hiking, and swimming.

PUBLIC AREAS RECREATION VISITORS SURVEY

In 1987 the USDA Forest Service was contracted to conduct a Public Areas Recreation Visitors Survey (PARVS) of visitors to North Carolina state parks. Information collected from 623 participants helps explain why people visit state parks, as well as the popularity of various activities.

Why Do People Visit State Park Units?

When asked why they chose to visit the park in which they were interviewed instead of another area, survey participants gave a variety of reasons. The convenient location was cited by 31 percent of the respondents; 25 percent thought other areas were too crowded; 21 percent liked the good facilities; 8 percent wanted to try a new area; 7 percent enjoyed the scenic beauty; and 6 percent came to see the attraction.

Whatever the reasons for visiting, visitors to state parks are satisfied enough to return. Seventy-eight percent of those surveyed indicated that they were return visitors. The average number of return trips per year was six.

Popularity of Outdoor Recreational Activities

Table V-3 shows the most popular outdoor recreational activities based on the responses of PARVS interviewees. Also shown is the percentage of interviewees who participated in each of the listed recreational activities in a state park system unit and elsewhere at least once in a 12-month period. As Table V-3 shows, there is a high correlation between what state park visitors like to do while visiting state parks and their recreational preferences in general.

Although a variety of recreational activities were available to park visitors, almost half of the respondents (48.33 percent) said they did not visit a park for any particular activity.

Table V-3. Most Popular Recreational Activities—PARVS

Activity	Percentage Participating Onsite	Percentage Participating General
Swimming (Lake, River, Ocean)	41.7	40.1
Developed Camping	30.9	38.4
Sightseeing	28.1	36.9
Walking	42.1	36.8
Picnicking	23.3	36.0
Pool Swimming	-	34.2
Dining Out	10.7	34.0
Family Gathering	8.7	28.1
Day Hiking	22.6	28.1
Visiting Museum	10.1	26.8
Visiting Historic Site	9.5	25.7
Pleasure Driving	15.7	24.1
Motor Boating	9.6	22.6
Special Events	-	19.3
Warm Water Fishing	6.9	18.3
Wildlife Observation	14.4	17.7
Biking	-	16.8
Cold Water Fishing	-	15.1
Using Self-Guided Trail	9.1	15.1
Photography	11.4	15.0
Saltwater Fishing	7.7	-
Water Skiing	5.8	-

SYSTEMWIDE PLAN PUBLIC MEETINGS

During August of 1999, public meetings were held simultaneously at eight locations across the state via a video conferencing system, with a Division facilitator at each location. Meeting locations were Asheville, Boone, Charlotte, Cullowhee, Pembroke, Raleigh, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem. The meetings were held to give state citizens an opportunity to express their recreational needs and how these needs might be met by the state parks system. With the video conferencing, citizens across the state could share their views and concerns.

The DPR sought to increase attendance at the meetings by sending notices to recreation professionals, local elected officials, park advisory committee members, conservation groups, and others. Press releases, media coverage, and notices placed in the parks were also used to promote attendance. In spite of these efforts, attendance was light. Those present, however, actively participated.

Methodology

Following a welcome and brief explanation of the organization and history of the state parks system, an explanation of the purpose of the meetings was given. Attendees were asked for their ideas and thoughts regarding the future of the state parks system and told how their suggestions would be incorporated into the revised systemwide plan.

Rather than simply ask for suggestions, a survey containing two lists were distributed to attendees in an attempt to organize participation and efficiently obtain input. The lists had been assembled based on comments from the public obtained at systemwide plan meetings held in 1993. The first list consisted of facilities that may or may not exist in the North Carolina State Parks System (e.g., hiking trails, fishing piers, group campsites). Attendees were asked to suggest additional facilities for the list, and a few were added, bringing the total number of facilities on the list to 24. Attendees were then asked to indicate which ones they would be likely to use by checking either "I would use," "I might use," or "I would not use." Attendees were then asked to review the list of facilities and choose by priority the five facilities that they would want most in the state parks system.

The second list contained statements describing various opinions about the North Carolina State Parks System. After suggesting additions to the list, attendees were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each of the 36 statements by checking either "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." Attendees were then asked to review the statements and choose by priority the five statements most important to them.

Shortly after the eight public meetings were held, the same survey containing the two lists was mailed to all park advisory committee members that had not attended in order to obtain their input as well. Eighty-two percent (191 of 232) of the park advisory committee members responded, and a total of 223 surveys were completed. A copy of the survey containing a summary of responses can be found in Appendix D.

SURVEY RESULTS

Table V-4 contains a summary of the survey responses regarding what facilities are most wanted in the North Carolina State Parks System. Respondents were asked to rank five facilities from the survey list of 24. These rankings were then weighted such that a higher rank is weighted 1½ times the previous rank. Unranked activities received a zero weight.

Table V-4. Public Meeting Results I: Most Wanted Facilities

Rank	Type of Facility	Weighted Score	Relative Demand
1.	Hiking trail	41.5	High
2.	Museum/educational exhibit	29.4	
3.	Nature trails	26.2	
4.	Canoe trails and access areas	20.9	
5.	Back-country campsite (walk-in)	14.1	
6.	Tent/trailer campsite without hookups	13.9	
7.	Picnic table with grill	11.6	
8.	Swimming area	10.6	
9.	Cabin with kitchen, heat and restroom	10.1	
10.	Picnic shelter	9.7	
11.	Boat ramp/dock	9.1	Moderate
12.	Observation decks	8.5	
13.	RV/trailer campsite with hookups	7.9	
14.	Simple cabin (enclosed living space)	6.1	
15.	Mountain bike trail	6.0	
16.	Beach	5.8	
17.	Horse trail	5.5	
18.	Fishing pier	5.4	
19.	Group campsites	4.7	
20.	Back-country campsites (bike, horseback or ATV)	4.1	
21.	Marina	3.2	
22.	Playground	2.3	Low
23.	Off-highway vehicle area	2.2	
24.	Open play area	1.4	

Table V-4 indicates that there is a high demand among survey respondents for hiking trails, museum/education exhibits, nature trails, canoe trails, and access areas. Respondents favored tent/trailer campsites without utility hookups and walk-in back country campsites to RV/trailer campsites with hookups, group campsites, and back country campsites accessible by bike, horseback, or all terrain vehicles. Open play areas, off-highway vehicle areas, playgrounds and marinas were the types of facilities that were least desired.

Table V-5 contains the list of 24 facilities contained in the survey. The facilities are listed in order according to the percentage of survey respondents that stated they would use or might use a particular type of facility.

Table V-5. Public Meeting Results II: Facility Use

Rank	Type of Facility	Percentage Who Would Use	Percentage Who Might Use	Percentage Who Would / Might Use
1	Observation decks	81.1%	17.5%	98.5 %
2	Picnic table with grill	77.8	20.4	98.1
3	Museum / Educational exhibit	79.3	18.4	97.7
4	Picnic shelter	72.1	25.6	97.7
5	Nature trails	83.5	13.6	97.1
6	Hiking trails	80.6	16.1	96.8
7	Beach	54.7	33.0	87.7
8	Swimming area	50.2	36.7	87.0
9	Cabin with kitchen, heat and restroom	50.2	36.2	86.4
10	Canoe trails and access areas	60.6	25.1	85.7
11	Simple cabin (enclosed living space)	39.9	45.1	85.0
12	Fishing pier	39.2	40.6	79.7
13	Group campsites	27.6	48.8	76.4
14	Boat ramp/dock	40.0	36.2	76.2
15	Open play area	35.2	41.0	76.2
16	Back-country campsite (walk-in)	40.3	34.3	74.5
17	Tent/trailer campsite without hookups	42.0	29.8	71.2
18	Playground	27.4	34.4	61.8
19	Marina	25.1	30.0	55.1
20	Back-country campsites (bike, horseback or ATV)	27.7	26.2	54.0
21	RV / Trailer campsite with hookups	20.4	30.3	50.7
22	Mountain bike trail	20.1	23.4	43.5
23	Horse trail	11.4	23.7	35.1
24	Off-highway vehicle area	13.7	19.0	32.7

While results shown in tables V-4 and V-5 are similar, the tables draw a distinction between what facilities people are most likely to use and the facilities that are most wanted in the state parks system. Almost everyone would use or might use an observation deck (98.5 percent) or a picnic table with a grill (98.1 percent), yet these facilities ranked twelfth and tenth as most wanted facilities. Museum/educational exhibit, hiking trails and nature trails each ranked high on both demand and use.

Some facilities, such as back country campsites and tent/trailer campsites with hookups, ranked moderately high in demand but much lower in use. Park users that desire these types of facilities see them as a high priority, but others simply do not camp and therefore are not likely to use these facilities.

Open play areas were deemed the least desired type of facility (Table V-4) yet 76.2 percent of survey respondents indicated that they would or might use such an area. Play grounds also had low demand, although 61.8 percent indicated they would or might use them. Of course, had children filled out the survey, playground demand might have been a great deal higher.

Off-highway vehicle areas ranked near the bottom in demand and lowest in use, with two-thirds of respondents indicating that they would not use off-highway vehicle areas. Likewise, only 35.1 percent responded that they would or might use horse trails.

The survey indicates that the public would like to have and will use the types of facilities that currently exist as well as the types of facilities that are planned to be constructed in North Carolina's state parks and recreation areas. No shift in the types of facilities to be constructed is needed based on this public input.

Table V-6 contains survey responses to 36 statements expressing various opinions about the state parks system. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with each statement. They were then asked to choose and rank in priority order the five statements that are most important to improve the North Carolina State Parks System. The priority rankings, shown in Table V-6, are weighted such that a higher rank is weighted 1 ½ times the previous rank. Unranked statements received a zero weight.

Table V-6. Public Meeting Results III: Opinions

Rank	Opinion Statement	Weighted Score	Agreement
1.	It's important to protect North Carolina's unique natural resources.	41.5	High
2.	Add new parks to protect important natural resources.	20.2	
3.	Finishing land acquisition and construction plans at existing parks should take priority over adding new parks.	18.9	
4.	Ranger pay equity with other NC law enforcement officers.	18.4	
5.	Increase operating expenditures to the Southeast US average of \$6.18.	10.7	
6.	Use tax revenues to increase state park funding.	10.5	
7.	Repairing and maintaining existing facilities should take priority over building new facilities.	10.2	
8.	Do not allow motorized vehicles off park roads.	9.4	
9.	Increase protection of endangered or threatened species instead of increasing recreational opportunities.	9.2	
10.	Promote the value of the state parks system.	7.7	

11.	Fees should be kept at a minimum to serve all members of the public.	7.2	
12.	Partner with agencies or non-profit organizations with similar missions.	6.7	
13.	Provide on-going funding to create a navigable passage way on canoe trails.	6.5	
14.	Improve access for persons with disabilities.	6.1	
15.	Develop an annual visitor pass.	5.5	
16.	Increase staffing to improve natural resource protection.	5.4	
17.	Use volunteers to improve visitor services and help park employees.	5.4	
18.	Increase trail funding.	5.3	
19.	Increase staffing of all types.	5.1	
20.	Provide more information about each park with exhibits at visitor centers or museums.	5.1	Moderate
21.	Add new parks to provide additional recreational opportunities.	5.0	
22.	Increase education programs for all schools.	4.8	
23.	Implement standard designs to save construction costs.	4.2	
24.	Increase inventories of natural and cultural resources and then monitor those resources.	4.0	
25.	Increase staffing to improve the interpretation and education opportunities for visitors.	3.3	
26.	Park staff should be available during all visitor-use hours.	3.2	
27.	Partner with universities for scientific research.	3.0	
28.	Route trails away from sensitive areas.	2.8	
29.	Close parks later during the summer.	2.6	
30.	Provide more recreational activities for visitors.	2.3	
31.	Improve information available on the Internet.	2.2	
32.	Increase park visitor awareness of park needs and deficiencies.	2.1	
33.	Provide more information about each park with brochures and maps.	2.1	
34.	Protect parks from exotic species.	1.9	
35.	Locate new parks equitably across the state based on geography and population.	1.1	
36.	Increase staffing to improve maintenance and cleanliness.	1.1	Low

Every survey respondent either agreed or strongly agreed with the first statement, that the top priority of the state parks system should be to protect North Carolina's unique natural resources. This survey priority affirms the policy and purpose of the state parks system as described in the State Parks Act. Closely related was the statement ranked second in priority: adding new parks to protect important natural resources.

Statements ranked second and third, interestingly, could be seen to contradict one another. “Finishing land acquisition and construction plans at existing parks should take priority over new parks” (statement #3) would mean that potential parks areas would likely go unprotected for years and perhaps be destroyed. However, public responses indicated that priorities should also be placed on protecting unique natural resources (statement #1) and adding new parks (statement #2). Protection of unique natural resources can be accomplished both by completing existing parks and by establishing new ones, such as with the recent acquisition of the Jocassee Gorges property in Transylvania County, resulting in the creation of Gorges State Park.

Support for increased public funding of the state parks system continues. Increasing operating expenditures to the average of southeastern states (statement #5) and using tax revenues to increase state park funding (statement #6) both ranked high. Closely tied to additional resources were several other statements such as providing on-going funding for clearing canoe trails, improved access for persons with disabilities, increased staffing and trail funding, and desire for more exhibits and educational programs.

Statement #8, “Do not allow motorized vehicles off park roads,” indicates that the respondents opposed allowing off-highway vehicle areas. This response corroborates the low demand for off-highway vehicle areas in the facility demand ranking shown on Table V-4 and the facility use ranking shown on Table V-5.

Locating parks across the state equitably based on geography and population (statement #35) was a low priority. Respondents preferred protection of unique natural resources wherever they happen to be, not simply creating parks equally spaced or near population centers. “Increase staffing to improve maintenance and cleanliness” was ranked last in priority.